



# International Civic Engagement: From Development Studies and Service-Learning, to Miami University-Dominica Partnerships

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## Abstract

During the past four years, faculty, students, and staff from Miami University have been cultivating civic engagement relationships with citizens of the Commonwealth of Dominica, in the Eastern Caribbean. For members of the Miami University community, this has been an effort to create opportunities for learning and scholarship through partnerships with people in the Global South who are working for community empowerment, progressive change, and sustainable development. For our Dominican counterparts, benefits include financial inputs, manual labor, relevant research projects, and an outside interest in contributing positively to ameliorating their community challenges. We work to base the Miami University-Dominica relationships on trust, long-term commitment, and mutuality, so that the benefits go back and forth in myriad ways. The result has been a set of relationships across international borders and cultural differences that is more fulfilling for both sides than typical study abroad, research, or ecotourism encounters in the Global South. This paper describes the conceptual underpinnings of this international civic engagement, and recounts three examples of the kinds of community groups and activities that the partnerships involve. We also note where the project has encountered constraints and limitations, and our next steps in the effort. We hope this example can serve as a template and motivation for other university groups to commit to cultivating civic engagement relationships with people and communities in the Global South.

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**Introduction**

Our international civic engagement in the small Eastern Caribbean country of Dominica began in 2005. We selected Dominica because of its welcoming people and its relatively unspoilt natural environment, and therefore because of its potential for sustainable development (Klak and Flynn, 2008). Over the last four years, we have been able to engage with more collaborators, develop more community relationships, and become involved in a wider range of issues and activities in Dominica. We hope this paper will be of value to other academic groups seeking to begin or deepen relationships associated with international civic engagement. Indeed, our work over the past four years would have benefited from an overview of this sort, so that our experience would have felt less like we were treading into unknown territory.

Our civic engagement work in the Eastern Caribbean revolves around an annual twelve-day study abroad course on sustainable development offered over spring break (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28XeH4m326o> ; <http://www.users.muohio.edu/klakt/>). This course has generated many ongoing collaborations with NGOs and community organizations in Dominica. Complementing the annual course and extending its academic enrichment in Dominica are research projects, some single authored and others with multiple authors, in a form others have labelled "participatory action research" (Bringle et al., 2006, 268). More specifically, since 2005, eight Master's and Honor's Thesis research projects in Dominica have operationalized civic engagement in a wide variety of ways. One student created a host family program in a village so that residents could reap more direct benefits from visitors, and to facilitate more direct cultural exchanges. Another student did a water quality analysis at ecotourism sites heavily used by cruise ship visitors. Yet another mapped the potential for landslides, which often reap havoc on the island. All of the student projects are enhanced by our longer-term partnerships with local people who articulate their own needs, blend them with the students' interests, and facilitate the research.

The organization of this paper is as follows. We begin with a literature review that draws not only from writings on community outreach and academic exchanges, but also from development studies. We then outline the conceptual framework that guides our empirical work. That is followed by three examples of our civic engagement activities in Dominica. Following that is a section that addresses some of the limitations and concerns associated with this project. The conclusion highlights the value of international civic engagement projects like this one for both teaching and scholarship, and mentions some of our next steps for engaging more fully with our students and community partners.

## **Civic Engagement in the Development and Service-Learning Literatures**

As we develop partnerships across social and spatial distances with others working for progressive change, we have found that a rigorous engagement with *theory* is a vital asset. In part this is because civic engagement, international development, and service-learning are intellectually, ideologically, and emotionally challenging. As we work through the conflicts and contradictions we encounter, we seek connections with a growing interdisciplinary body of literature that asks similar questions in other contexts. Relatedly, we often find the relationship between theoretical and personal engagement dialectical, meaning that answers and insights for one are found in the other. When facing a decision about whether to invest in a new type of partnership with a community group, theory guides us as to which activities we should prioritize. It happens the other way as well, when our working relationships on the ground give deeper meaning to theoretical constructs.

Progress in this body of theory is not always easy to trace, for writings on civic engagement are found scattered across many disciplines (Crabtree, 2008). However, we find this interdisciplinary discourse to be a strength and draw upon a wide range of perspectives to inform our critical reflexivity during our empirical research and community work. Recent academic literature has assisted the design of our civic engagement projects in Dominica, which we hope may serve as a model for future research and meaningful partnerships for social change in other locales.

The theoretical work on civic engagement upon which we've drawn is based primarily in two distinct analytical frameworks: development studies and service-learning. Both frameworks have motivated us to become immersed in this ongoing project in Dominica, and it's worth thinking about some of the parallels and overlaps between these literatures that have not previously been elucidated.

### **Development Studies**

In the first literature, development studies, civic engagement is seen as both an instrument and a goal of policymaking. It is now widely acknowledged in development thinking that projects

are more likely to be successful if they explicitly engage local community members (Desai and Potter, 2008). From this perspective, traditionally top-down development efforts can achieve greater success by incorporating those at the grassroots. While this development-based civic engagement does not directly involve students, it is certainly an idea presented to students in classroom-based courses on development.

A definition of this type of civic engagement comes from two development practitioners. Khalid Malik is Director of the Evaluation Office at the United Nations Development Programme, and Swarnim Waglé is a consultant to the World Bank. They define civic engagement as “a process that organizes citizens or their entrusted representatives to influence, share and control public affairs” (Malik and Waglé, 2002: 88). From this perspective, civic engagement is a specific form of participation. Malik and Waglé refer to “an emphasis on civic objectives and concerns” as a defining feature of this “process” without identifying which agents – policymakers or local stakeholders – are involved in designating local priorities (Malik and Waglé, 2002: 88). These authors nonetheless go on to identify three channels through which civic engagement can facilitate development efforts: voice, representation, and accountability (88). In other words, citizens are able to influence the institutions that govern them by expressing their demands and priorities directly, by doing so through effective representation, and by holding such institutions responsible for working on their constituents’ behalf (cf Bhuvan and Williams, 1992; Bebbington et al., 2006).

Perhaps a deeper argument for employing civic engagement in the development process comes from David Korten, founder and president of the People-Centered Development Forum. The PCDF was originally designed to be a network of academics and activists seeking to challenge the current hegemonic development paradigm, epitomized by the corporate-led economic globalization of institutions like the World Bank. Korten believes civic engagement can serve as a corrective to out-of-touch, overly centralized, and hierarchical development institutions. He argues that civic engagement is the method by which to accomplish the change necessary for “just and sustainable societies”:

*One reason appropriate action is not forthcoming is because of policy actions that concentrate control over productive resources in institutions that are unmindful of local needs and lack public accountability for the consequences of their actions. Enabling action is needed at global and national levels to restore to local people and communities control of the productive assets on which their livelihoods depend (Korten 1996, 36).*

According to Korten, civic engagement offers the possibility for the “reclaiming [of] citizen sovereignty” by localizing the nexus of decision-making and, eventually, bringing politics and economies to a more human scale (41-2). His examples of such civic engagement include the Zapatistas uprising in opposition to NAFTA, Brazilian neighborhood committees to feed the hungry, and citizen groups and NGOs outlining a citizen agenda-building process at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED; for another example, see Olesen, 2004).

These grassroots examples of civic engagement contrast with those of Malik and Waglé, who seek to build community outreach and consultation into World Bank development projects. Korten's civic engagement is more radical. Whereas Malik and Waglé refer to national governments and international development institutions engaging local citizens as a component of policy implementation, Korten calls for citizens to engage one another's concerns in a process intended to overthrow and replace these institutions. But there are also similarities. Though they have opposing visions for institutional reform, Korten, Malik, and Waglé all frame civic engagement as an issue of governance, seeing it as one way for citizens to exercise their right and obligation to voice their concerns and participate in the institutions that govern them.

The above authors illustrate that, while civic engagement can serve as a tool of implementation for dominant development institutions, it can also enable communities and grassroots organizations to bypass these very institutions and, in doing so, to realize a self-defined development alternative. In a classic reading in development studies, Hirschman (1972) years ago explained how the grassroots can be empowered through civic engagement. Hirschman focused attention on the actions of community organizations dedicated to sustainable development and a more democratic civil society that have chosen to work outside formal institutions of policymaking including the national state and the IFIs (International Financial Institutions). Like Korten, Hirschman locates the agency for engagement with citizens (rather than originating from World Bank policy, for example), and argues that citizen engagement with one another enables them to decide whether and how to engage governing institutions. Hirschman notes that, in addition to a capacity to influence policymaking by working within institutions, individuals and groups also have the ability to effect what they themselves define as positive change by expressing their dissatisfaction toward a given institution, or by opting out of it altogether.

As the world becomes more interconnected in many ways, there seem to be relatively few ways for regular people to collaborate for social change across international boundaries. Global flows of capital, trade, and information mean that citizens from disparate countries have a growing political and economic stake in one another, yet collaboration directly with one another on development challenges and across distance and cultural barriers presents deep challenges. Further, the governments and development agencies charged with representing community interests often lack transparency and accountability, leaving their constituents frustrated and underserved (Simonelli et al., 2004). Despite wide recognition of the importance of community engagement in sustainable development and a rhetorical focus on participatory research among development institutions such as the World Bank (see Bhuvan and Williams 1992; Nelson and Wright 1995), a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach continues to dominate applied development projects (McMichael, 2004; Desai and Potter, 2008). Yet many scholars argue that civic engagement can serve to address many roots causes of social injustice (Kiely and Nielson, 2002/2003; Crabtree, 2008). Though we continue to maintain critical self-reflection, the authors have found civic engagement to be a worthwhile approach for creating

deep, productive relationships across international borders, and in pursuit of sustainable development.

### Service-Learning

A second literature on civic engagement, distinct from the work in development studies discussed above, comes from educators working to create opportunities for students to work in communities. This literature is probably more familiar to readers of this journal. The civic engagement in this literature is compatible with the development studies approach discussed by Hirschman and lauded by Korten. Here, civic engagement is defined as teaching, research, or service both in and with the community (Bringle et al., 2007). However, models of this engagement (see also Bringle et al., 2006) do not necessarily include formal government institutions as direct participants in these democratic processes for social change. The implication is that relationships between academic institutions – faculty, students, and curriculum – and community members can, when necessary, bypass ineffective governments, in effect creating new, informal modes of governance through relationships between members of the community and academia.

Civic engagement is often considered a form of, or even synonymous with, service-learning (Bringle et al., 2006). In this essay, however, we wish to make a clear distinction between our use of the two terms. We acknowledge that their meanings are controversial and often hotly contested, but that should not inhibit drawing distinctions between different forms of off-campus activities. We will use the term “service-learning” to refer to practices in which students enter communities to volunteer by providing help to those in need. We’ll use the term “civic engagement” to refer to practices by university groups (including students, staff, and faculty) to partner with community groups, and to collaborate with those groups toward mutually-beneficial goals. In our definition of and experience with civic engagement, activities must involve collaboration between groups of people, not just individuals.

Other writers have made similar distinctions, while sometimes using different terms. Boyte (2008), for example, distinguishes “volunteerism” from “public work”, while Bringle et al. (2007) contrast “community service” with “civic engagement”. As we define both service learning and civic engagement, students earn credit hours in various ways depending on how the curriculum is organized. The activity can be a required component of a course, an optional course add-on, an independent study, part of a thesis research project, or a general requirement for graduation, and there are probably other formats.

A recent special section of *USA Today* (2009) provides a typical presentation of our concept of service-learning. A newspaper report such as this is influential because it communicates to a broad popular audience beyond academia. The language used to describe service-learning in the *USA Today* special issue reveals assumptions of unequal agency between students and community members. One of the headlines proclaims: “Young people donate their time and their unique skills and experiences to reach out to others in need” while another quotes a

student who explains that "giving back is our way of being empowered...". One of the articles notes that more students now "perform community service" than in an earlier generation.

What we wish to draw attention to in this typical depiction of service learning is the "direction of arrows", which tend to be one-way: The students have so much to give, and poor people have so many needs. Other writers have similarly suggested that what we are calling service-learning often features a "uni-directional flow of expertise" (Bringle et al., 2009: 2). True, the student volunteers featured in *USA Today* become "empowered", but only through their own acts of helping the poor, not from anything their target populations has to offer. As much as we applaud young people volunteering in an effort to improve communities, we are concerned that the viewpoint is too top-down and one-sided. It seems to reinforce ideas that wealthier and more formally educated and privileged people hold the answers to the problems of the helpless and less fortunate. However, those with less material wealth and fewer economic opportunities who have been denied social and political rights have valuable lessons to teach to those coming from different life experiences. Our concept of civic engagement is much closer to what Thomas Ehrlich calls "civic education" than it is to this notion of service-learning. Drawing on John Dewey, Ehrlich advocates reciprocal activities involving students and community members whereby they "should interact with each other, learn from each other, grow with each other, and together make their communities more than the sum of their parts" (Ehrlich, 2000: np).

Other researchers have articulated a similar critique to this approach to service-learning, whereby professors and students can be seen as having monopoly over agency bestow resources and services upon a given community. As Saltmarsh and his authors (2009: 7) observe, this approach "is predominantly shaped by specialized expertise 'applied' externally 'to' or 'on' the community, providing 'solutions' to what has been determined to be the community's 'needs'." Others have commented that these efforts, however well-intentioned, might be seen as patronizing to the individuals of the community being "served" (Cruz, 1990). Further, the critique has been raised that service-learning risks entrenching exploitive relationships and reinforcing existing inequalities of power (Mitchell 2008; see also Cooks, Scharrer and Paredes, 2004; Pompa, 2002). Perhaps more troubling, service-learning may encourage students to view those they serve as victims rather than community partners (McBride, Brav, Menon and Sherraden, 2006). As Pompa (2002: 68) warns:

*Unless facilitated with great care and consciousness, "service" can unwittingly become an exercise in patronization. In a society replete with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning's potential danger is for it to become the very thing it seeks to eschew.*

We feel that partnering through civic engagement is a more critical form of community outreach. Civic engagement provides an alternative to what others have argued to be historically problematic practices in a paternalistic discipline (Neururer and Rhoads, 1998), and



it more fully realizes the contemporary goals of a discipline struggling to overcome systems of privilege (Robinson, 2000; Brown, 2001).

In this literature review, we've tried to highlight some important connections between concepts and practices. We believe that civic engagement can contribute to sustainable development and social justice, as informed by literature in the fields of development studies and service-learning. Civic engagement is a way to connect the priorities of both fields. Development can only succeed through deep human relationships, and civic engagement cannot ignore the political, economic, and historical context of a given project. Collaboration towards sustainable living between community members, local leaders, and concerned activists forms a robust foundation for ethical development that meets the social and ecological needs of a given place. The following section further explains these interdisciplinary concepts that we apply to international civic engagement.

## **A Conceptual Framework that Guides our International Civic Engagement**

In this section we discuss concepts that are central to the way we approach international civic engagement. The concepts we embrace and aspire to are collaborative and reciprocal partnerships, mutuality, democratic leadership, trust building, and trans-contextual sustainability. As noted in the previous section, our operational conceptual framework begins with a fundamental distinction between service-learning and the type of civic engagement we practice. For many people in the academic community, service-learning is about students going out into surrounding lower income communities and helping needy people. We find this approach too top-down and one-sided. In contrast, our approach to civic engagement is purposefully and actively centered on collaborating with our community partners and on reciprocal relationships with them. This means we work to define goals and projects through long-term interactions with a range of community leaders, including those not conventionally viewed as leaders, such as members of local organizations working behind the scenes to improve the quality of life in communities.

The concept of mutuality is key to our work. We define mutuality as an ongoing effort to have the ideas, goals, plans, and benefits to continually go back and forth across the collaborative partnerships (cf Olesen, 2004). The partnerships simultaneously involve faculty, staff, students, and an array of community members. If service-learning is about stepping beyond the university to help those in greater need, mutuality is about meeting partners half way, interacting with them horizontally rather than hierarchically, and having the collaboration and benefits resonate dialectically. We sometimes encounter some resistance to mutuality from some of our Dominican partners, who themselves have absorbed mainstream ideas that university people can deliver answers to their problems. However, once our partners better



understand our adherence to the idea of approaching issues collaboratively, deeper and more respectful relationships emerge.

Building trust is absolutely essential for the growth of any international civic engagement project. Trust must be earned on both sides of a civic engagement relationship. We began our project with a major advantage in that Dominicans are exceptionally welcoming people, as we knew going in. Whereas most of the Caribbean region has been seriously altered by the commodified experience of mass tourism, less touristy Dominica has yet to be thoroughly transformed (Pattullo, 2006). Host-visitor interactions in Dominica are often more authentic and personalized than on many other islands. Still, our project has obstacles. To be blunt: what's there to trust in fleeting visits by a mainly white and relatively wealthy university people from the US? We actively work to earn trust through our behaviors rather than promises. We labor to be steadfastly reliable and attentive to detail, to honor and follow through on commitments, to actively solicit and to listen carefully to our partners' views on our collaborations, and to demonstrate that we care and are in for the long-haul. This is a tall order indeed, and represents an aspirational list rather than anything guaranteed. We don't pretend to have fully succeeded, and after all, it is up to our partners to judge. From our end, we can say that we have been fortunate that many Dominican partners have earned our trust and entrusted us.

A certain conceptualization of leadership is also central to our work. From our years collaborating with Miami University's Wilks Leadership Institute (<http://community.muohio.edu/wilks/>), we have learned much about a radically democratic version of leadership that we strive to operationalize in our civic engagement activities (Battistoni et al., 2009). Such leadership has little to do with formal titles and political positions. Democratic leadership is instead about learning to mobilize and energize community members to work together for the common good. It does not seek publicity, accolades, or a following. This leadership measures success through mobilizing an array of community members working collaboratively in a sustained long-term effort to identify pressing community needs and to creatively and steadfastly pursue their solutions (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Boyte (2008, 101) makes a distinction similar to our top down versus democratic leadership in his concepts of the outside expert versus the intellectual leader. Our approach to leadership is also in accord with scholarly work in participatory, action, and feminist approaches to research which seek collaborative research on behalf of social justice. As Crabtree (2008, 24-6) argues, "democratizing inquiry" in this way offers an alternative to the monopolies of knowledge and authority cemented through traditional models of academic research.

A final theme running through our Dominica civic engagement work is sustainability. We deploy a robust and inclusive concept of sustainability, that certainly includes ecological issues, but also much more. Our sustainability agenda aims to nurture local efforts to live more sustainably, restore and enhance ecological integrity, create more vibrant and inclusive communities, and foster meaningful and stable livelihoods. Elsewhere the first author has

elaborated on this concept's relevance to community and village livelihoods in the Caribbean and Central America (Klak, 2007).

We expand this robust concept of sustainability geographically. Because sustainable living is a theme that is relevant everywhere on earth, we advocate thinking about sustainability transnationally or better, trans-contextually. We work to identify ways that sustainability challenges and solutions transcend locale. We seek learning experiences that transfers back and forth between Dominica and the US in a dialectical and inspiring way between seemingly different settings, international and local. This transcontextual concept of sustainability contributes to breaking down the conventional intellectual boundaries separating issues and problems in the Global North versus those in the Global South. Relatedly, the first author offers an on-campus course on the ideas of "development" that interrogates and critiques such powerful dualism separating Global North or the so-called developed world, from the Global South or the so-called developing world. Some of the undergraduate and graduate students take this development course before they participate in the Dominica course. Our civic engagement work demonstrates empirically and powerfully how such dualistic ideas blind us from our mutual challenges, interests, collaborations, and solutions. Our trans-contextual notion of sustainability also connects with an emerging movement in academic civic engagement to promote both local and global citizenship (Battistoni et al., 2009).

While the concepts outlined above certainly apply to the activities associated with the annual course in Dominica, we also aspire to put them into practice in our "participatory action research" (Bringle et al., 2006, 268). Indeed, the many research projects by Miami University faculty and students in Dominica enhance the annual course, and vice versa, as an example will illustrate. One of the authors, a recent graduate of Miami's Geography Masters program, first visited the island as a participant in the March workshop. This course on international civic engagement and sustainable development helped her establish contacts and conduct reconnaissance work in preparation for her thesis research on local land politics during the following summer. Her nine weeks of fieldwork were guided by the same principles of international civic engagement: by living in a home stay during the research period, the researcher directed funds into the local economy and also immersed her studies in local spaces. The analytical framework was originally designed with a focus on local concerns – debates over land use practices and land tenure policy – and then evolved during fieldwork based on community participants' inputs. The author informed her methodology through consultations with local community organizations and the elected Carib Council. All products of the research, including the thesis and a published article (Mullaney, 2009; 2010), have been sent to the Carib Council, with copies to be placed in the Council office and neighborhood resource centers and thereby made accessible to community members. In this example, international civic engagement began with an annual course which served to catalyze collaborative work towards social change and also to train future scholars according to the principles of mutuality and critical reflection. Future versions of the annual course will be

enriched by the author's collaborative work in the Carib territory and her deeper understanding of its land politics.

The concepts described in this section represent aspirational values, in that we have an ongoing desire to more deeply deploy them, and we realize that our partnerships and projects are works in progress. These concepts provide more than a backdrop to our Dominica project. We actively engage them on an ongoing basis as a guide to our actions, decisions and commitments. We work to be self-critical and reflect on our ongoing projects in light of the civic engagement goals associated with the concepts. Our work in Dominica unites students of international development and local community members around civic engagement projects which, we argue, are both the means and the end of sustainable development. The projects feature collaboration and also encourage all participants to practice democratic leadership.

### **Three Examples of Our Civic Engagement Relationships**

Each of the following three examples of our civic engagement relationships in Dominica has a trajectory with a distinctive past, present, and future status. While this temporality may seem obvious, what we wish to stress is how each relationship has expanded vividly, unpredictably, and usually fruitfully over time following initial agreements for collaboration and steady nurturing of the relationships based on trust and mutuality. While the current status of each of the three relationships is solid, future options hold much greater potential, and may take the engagement to a level unimaginable at an early stage. The temporal trajectory and unfolding drama associated with each relationship is one of the most exciting aspects of the project. At any point in time it is impossible to know if, when, and how a particular collaborative relationship will expand to a higher level of engagement. What is for certain, however, is that ongoing engagement generates new opportunities for collaboration across the divisions of geography, culture, economic opportunity, and life experience. The conscious-raising process associated with the exchange -- as well as the writing about it in this paper -- open up new possibilities for civic engagement and sustainable development activities in the future.

As mentioned previously, a key component of our long-term investment in Dominican communities is the annual study abroad course. It primarily enrolls Miami University students, but has also involved students from other US schools and from Dominica State College who themselves contribute diversity and alternative perspectives to the mix. Miami University students spend weeks reading, reflecting, preparing in the classroom before departing for the Eastern Caribbean. They study sustainable development, the history of Dominica, and a range of approaches to international cultural exchange, engagement, and collaboration. The goal of these pre-trip studies is to move students out of their intellectual and emotional comfort zones and to develop their skills as critical, active learners. As outlined by Tania (2008), this pedagogic approach is distinguished from service-learning, which she critiques as depoliticized and containing aspects of "forced volunteerism" (Forbes et al., 1999), by its explicit focus on deconstructing systems of inequality. Our course emphasizes to students that this exchange

represents a strong learning opportunity for them, but also offers something even more profound. It is no mere academic exercise, the benefits are mutual between all participants, and they will stay with them long after the course has ended regardless of the career path they choose. Students learn that international civic engagement is a chance to challenge entrenched relationships of power amongst participants, to develop meaningful relationships with members of Dominican communities, and to contribute to social and ecological justice and positive change.

### Grand Fond village

Our ongoing relationship with Grand Fond village in eastern Dominica was at first an engagement with a nearby innovative, and award-winning ecotourism lodge, identified as such by a Miami University undergraduate researching sustainability practices in Dominica's tourism sector. Our first reconnaissance visit to Dominica in 2005 by the first author, the undergraduate researcher, and another graduate student with ecotourism interests included a stay at this lodge. The owner graciously introduced us to an array of village leaders including the school principals. That initial contact has blossomed into a long-term relationship with the schools that includes an ongoing matching funds campaign (described below). Now, one of the highlights of each March course trip is the activity-rich day spent at the schools. We hold an assembly, sing songs, exchange gifts, celebrate and reflect on our partnership commitments, divide up and work with students in classrooms, eat lunch, and play sports and games. Grand Fond students look forward to this special school day as much as we do.

The concepts of partnership, mutuality and trust characterize our long-term relationships with the schools and Grand Fond village as a whole. Figure 1 below captures some of the dimensions of these deepening relationships. For several years we have conducted a bi-annual matching funds campaign with village schools. At first glance, this might look one-sided, but Miami University students, faculty and staff reap many rewards. We are welcomed in Grand Fond as members of the extended village community. First-time visiting students are often overwhelmed by the reception, a result of years of collaboration and trust building by their predecessors.

One of our graduate students, Chris Thompson (shown top center in Figure 2), created a home stay program in the village as part of his master's thesis research project. The rationale for the home stay program, from a development studies perspective, is that villagers can more directly reap benefits from ecotourists (Klak, 2007). Staying in homes provides our study group powerful experiences of daily life. Home stay also contributes to sustainable ecotourism by bringing visitors' incomes directly into the villages where it is most needed. Also present for the ceremonial photo is a former Member of Parliament, Abraham Browne (top, second from left). We have met with him on many occasions and he holds many of the same passionate priorities we believe in, including community empowerment, sustainable ecotourism, and youth development through organized sports. The NGO referred to in the photo is the Sustainable Living Initiative. Notably, the Dominica course instructors are not present for the

event captured in the photo, suggesting how collaborations joyfully have advanced beyond their faculty originators.



Figure 1: Annotated photo, originally for a press release, commemorating the Miami University-Grand Fond Schools matching fundraising campaign.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity for the Miami students participating in the Dominica course to develop relationships across social distance comes when our university group disaggregates, and pairs of students spend two or three nights in homes. Though students are told repeatedly what to expect, they are deeply taken aback at the contrasts between the home environment of Dominican families and the material comforts they take for granted in the US. This home stay instills in these students a greater appreciation for global inequality than a classroom setting ever could, yet it does so in an environment of mutual respect rather than pity or condemnation. Instead of being overwhelmed or judgmental about encounters that are unfamiliar, students are able to integrate their understanding of the structural causes of political and economic inequalities with a deep appreciation for different lifestyles and cultural traditions. This instance of civic engagement allows students to enter into relationships informed by their studies of power and political economy that took place in the classroom. Because of their awareness of inequality and their own position with respect to the community



they visit, these are no longer abstract concepts. The resulting space enables effective, respectful dialogue between participants and helps to deconstruct prejudices held on both sides (Williams and McKenna, 2002).

As with our entire trip abroad, the roles of authority are upended through home stay: our Dominican hosts are the expert instructors and privileged American students are more humbly-appreciative than ever before. The home stay setting is intimate and moving. Dominican families take the opportunity to share their values, history, agricultural techniques and bounty, pride in their community and way of life, and also discuss the challenges they face, their development priorities, and local strategies for change. They express enthusiasm for comparing their personal experiences to a broader context with the students that correlates with the civic engagement experience of other scholars (see Crabtree, 2008: 25-6). The visiting students' obvious interest in local issues and farming, and their eagerness to learn provides a service in itself, for these exchanges support local pride in the community and the simple rural lifestyle, and upend conventional stereotypes of human value in a commodified political economy.

The relationships cultivated during these home stays are not one-directional. Though students may initially need to take in their unfamiliar surroundings, they quickly act on mutual interest in cultural exchange and avidly share stories of their own lives with their Dominican hosts, who are likewise eager to learn about life in the US. Crucial to these experiences are the follow-up sessions for course participants, guided by Mezirow's (2000) framework of transformational learning theory, in which students share what they learned and reflect on their assumptions about poverty, wealth, community, and family in light of their recent insights into other people's way of living. In fact, the course instructors try to organize a reflection session as many evenings of the trip as scheduling allows. Participant reflection is one of the most valuable, if challenging, components of a course in international community engagement (Whitney and Clayton, forthcoming). Students' experiences deepen when required to journal, process, articulate, react to (not always positively), and discuss each day's intense activities. Rigorous reflection allows them to connect their experiences to academic theories of citizenship and sustainability, strengthening both the intellectual and capacity-building aspects of the trip.

A majority of students upon reflection state that the home stays were the most thought-provoking and valuable components of their Dominica experience. Such person-to-person engagement sparks their enthusiasm and reinforces their commitment to being active citizens – at home and as members of a local and a global community. Based on our positive home stay experience in Grand Fond, we are now working on host family programs in other Dominican villages, so that more host families can benefit, and so that students can experience a wider variety of home environments.

We have also worked to enhance sports activity in Grand Fond. This is in response to discussions with community and other Dominican leaders indicating that there is a growing

problem with youth derelict-ism in the Grand Fond area that they believe may be confronted through sports. In response to these issues, Miami University students procured dozens of soccer balls, basketballs, and athletic shoes, and delivered them to village leaders in March 2009. During each visit we make a point for Miami University people to mix it up with local students as well as adults on the village soccer field, basketball court, and playground.

### Giraudel Village

Giraudel is an intriguing and inspiring case study because it defies conventional development thinking. It is a small village five miles southeast of the capital city of Roseau on a dead-end road. Giraudel's income generating possibilities are minimal because it lacks the locational advantages associated with proximity to the country's coastline, trans-island road system, or national parks. Giraudel was therefore written off years ago as hopelessly without income sources and destined for massive outmigration. Despite these problems which have led most observers to declare Giraudel undevelopable in the current era, village leaders have positioned Giraudel as the island's "flower basket." Local leaders have inspired residents to cultivate ornamental plants, participate in guiding visitors on tours, and sell flower arrangements. A Peace Corps volunteer coordinated the creation of a local plant guidebook that has helped to attract additional visitors, including English horticultural clubs (GEFGG, 2006). Notably, Giraudel's leaders are virtually all female. They provide an encouraging example of unconventional gender dynamics and political power relations (Desai and Potter, 2008; Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Some of the village of Giraudel's female leaders with the first author



Miami University's relationship with Giraudel began by contacting Atherton Martin, an internationally respected environmental activist and former Dominica Minister of Agriculture. He and his wife Fae, a nutritionist, operate a nearby ecolodge, which they believe offers a business model demonstrating the viability of sustainable development and healthy lifestyles. Evidence of the success of this model is the 2008 Geotourism Award earned by their Community Gardens and Culinary Tour that features Giraudel's flower cultivators and Fae's cooking (Changemakers, 2009).

All of these activities at Exotica and in Giraudel are incorporated into our annual Dominica course. While at Exotica, we engage with Fae on the nutritional value of traditional Dominican cooking, and with Atherton who is deeply involved in sustainability activities in Dominica and abroad. They in turn observe our grassroots approach to learning about social movements, grassroots development, and its possibilities. We spend a day in Giraudel interacting with its leaders and community members, touring gardens, learning hands-on about sustainable agriculture, and working shoulder to shoulder with villagers in their nascent botanical garden.

Giraudel also offers a concrete example of democratic leadership, which, as mentioned earlier, can be characterized as effective grassroots leadership without title or ego. Much of our experiential learning during these visits is designed around Dewey's (1916) philosophy of democratic education. Giraudel's grassroots leaders demonstrate to Miami University students, and to all who visit or purchase their products, how limited resources can be effectively mobilized for sustainable development, a lesson worth learning in all corners of our fragile earth. Giraudel's gardeners also demonstrate how sustainable livelihoods can emanate from people working in their long-term communities and doing what they would normally do and love: cultivating their backyard food and flower gardens, working with the soil, and interacting with nature, their community, and interested visitors.

Our relationship with Giraudel illustrates the mutuality in our civic engagement work: the village leaders inspire and teach us their organizational methods, and our visiting group supports their local NGO financially and contributes labor in the village botanical garden. We seek to contribute manual labor whenever possible in Dominica for both material and symbolic reasons. The material rationale is pretty obvious: in a tropical society so oriented to farming, the land, and outdoor work, there is always plenty of physical work to do. The symbolic significance of the manual labor is more important. Manual labor contributions help to disrupt conventional perceived power relations between our village hosts in the Global South and visitors (often perceived as white-collar tourists) from the wealthy Global North (cf Boyte, 2006). Our hosts are impressed with our willingness to work up a sweat and get dirty. Our students experience -- however briefly -- some of the essential, natural elements of the physical, daily work in the rural Global South.

Future prospects for our relationship with Giraudel and Exotica hold even greater opportunities for mutuality and hands-on learning. We have had positive discussions with Giraudel leaders about the idea of home stay in the village during a future trip. With Atherton Martin, who

tutors Master's degree students in politics and governance at the University of the West Indies, the first author has discussed co-teaching for an entire semester. The idea is to partner Miami University and UWI students, and place each pair in a one or two week internship with one of our many community, farming, environmental, governmental, NGO, or small business partners. These hands-on experiences, coupled with group discussions before and after for reflection and comparisons, would take our Dominica civic engagement activities to a significantly higher level. It is important to note that these future possibilities are only now imaginable following years of building relationships of trust and reciprocity.

### Local Farmers and the Dominica Banana Industry

Not all of our partnerships are village-based. An example of a country-wide partnership is associated with banana farming. Our partnership with banana farmers further illustrates how most of our relationships with our Dominican counterparts have both an instructional and a scholarly component, which reinforce and extend each other. We engage banana farmers during our annual course and in an ongoing multi-authored research project.

Our Dominica study groups engage in hands-on work with local farmers to better understand the ecology of agriculture and the relationships that farmers have with the land. Students in the Dominica class work and interact directly with food producers, and thereby seek to overcome the gap between societal and development dualisms such as blue-collar versus white-collar, rural versus urban, black versus white, and Global North versus Global South. In Figure 3 below, one of our students learns the work of processing and packing fair trade bananas for export from Dominica. She will never see a banana in quite the same way.



Figure 3: Student helps a Dominica farmer pack bananas for export. Hand protection is required by Fairtrade to guard against the fungicide.

A goal of our hands-on course work with farmers is to encourage students to become closer to the land (Leopold, 1949; Uhl, 2003). Our study abroad trips reflect the influence that such experiences can have. Several students who had little previous interest in growing food have mentioned that they have planted vegetable gardens after their Dominica experience. Further, students draw from these Dominica agricultural experiences and engage in short-term participatory research in which they engage and learn to respect local common knowledge.

The authors' research on the Eastern Caribbean banana industry illustrates how international civic engagement can build lasting relationships on both the professional and personal levels. We have engaged in months of participant observation and hundreds of interviews with small-scale banana farmers. These experiences have contributed important insights and perspectives on local impacts of a changing export industry, strengthening our geographical research on sustainable development. In addition, the results of this research are valuable and relevant to the work of community leaders, NGO staff, and government officials concerned with the health of the agricultural sector. In interviews with leaders of the national banana contracting company, with staff of the non-profit Fairtrade organization, and with representatives including the Director of the Ministry of Agriculture, we received feedback on our research design and objectives and also advice on methodology and protocol. Community members have a direct stake in learning more about the perspectives of local banana farmers, and we have arranged to share the complete results from our research with government representatives, Fairtrade personnel, and community members. The authors have a forthcoming paper, co-authored with three Masters students, that draws on this fieldwork to examine the challenges facing banana exporters, which we will distribute among the participants in our research (Klak et al., forthcoming). We look forward to receiving feedback regarding the writing, and will continue working with many of our research participants in annual school trips to Dominica.

Our preexisting relationships with community leaders and farmers developed during the annual school trips in previous years provided us with initial opportunities for interviews. These interviews and the time spent with local farmers accomplished more than data extraction: we cultivated relationships that snowball and yield further opportunity for civic engagement, service-learning, and collaborative development projects. They have now come full circle, feeding back into the yearly trip with students and yielding hands-on, experiential, and personalized dimensions of these ongoing civic engagement projects.

In this example, a project began as academic inquiry, sparked by an interest in international development and recent WTO restructuring of the banana trade (Wiley, 2007), has grown and deepened into sustained collaboration and an exchange of ideas. Through these increasingly egalitarian student-teacher relationships, participants deepen their understanding of global political economy, community, social justice, and inequality while expanding their awareness of one another's culture and world view (Birge, 2005). Crabtree (2008) similarly encourages us to connect civic engagement to international service-learning precisely to facilitate these kinds of mutually-transformative learning experiences. As students, researchers, and community participants exchange ideas, they reinforce one another's individual roles as agents of social

change and also hone the concepts and methods by which we generate mutuality and reciprocity on the ground.

## **Challenges Experienced while working at International Civic Engagement**

Vital to any civic engagement is an ongoing, reflexive critical awareness of one's approach and the impacts of one's project. The authors see international civic engagement as an opportunity to form meaningful relationships across social differences and to facilitate collaborative social change. We seek to contribute to discussions of the concerns about civic engagement, service-learning, and paths toward sustainable development, because we believe that tackling tough questions is the surest way to strengthen an eminently worthwhile set of approaches. In this effort, here are some challenges we have experienced along the way.

One daunting challenge for the coordinators of international civic engagement courses is how to teach and apply critical development studies in a way that is humbling without being paralyzing. Learning the depth of global injustices can overwhelm many students. The concepts we teach, including mutuality, empowerment, sustainability, and social justice, set the bar for change at what often seems an impossible height. Our goal is to help students open their minds so that they may recognize when structural change is needed, and also to support their drive to realize changes that they find necessary as individuals and as community members. Questions of positionality, power, and inequality are essential guides to our work, but they can easily dissolve our confidence into an abyss of existential guilt unless grounded in tangible relationships with others. We believe that the hands-on nature of civic engagement in the Global South serves both these objectives: bringing participants face-to-face with manifestations of inequity and injustice and providing them with ways to act on them. Human connections and personal relationships are perhaps our best resource for confronting and resolving the conflicts and tensions that stand in the way of change. Connections to humans and our shared environment and projects keep us true to our ideals and accountable to others. Civic engagement partnerships are the traction for accomplishing concrete change, but change remains an overwhelming challenge at both the personal and systemic levels.

Geography itself creates one of the biggest challenges for international civic engagement. It takes great commitment to maintain and deepen relationships with our many Dominica collaborators from whom we are separated by thousands of miles and by cultural differences. The time and effort this takes is a supreme challenge given all other demands on both sides of the relationships. Our face-to-face time is relatively fleeting, and requires many more hours nurturing and working on the details of our partnerships at a distance. But how best to stay in touch with our Dominican collaborators when we are not on the island? Unlike US academics, most Dominicans don't rely on e-mail. This is in part because consistent internet access is uncommon; it also because Dominicans would rather talk than type. For most

Dominicans, communication across distance, national or international, is by cell phone, which is more widely available than the internet. While phone communication has its advantages, it is less than adequate for advancing project goals that require scheduling and specific commitments on both sides. Having an electronic or written record of our conversations, agreements and next steps is an essential but missing component of cell phone discussion.

Fundraising campaigns present yet another challenge. Fundraising is desperately needed and much appreciated by village schools that lack so much of the educational infrastructure we in the US take for granted. But as most parents know from their children's schools, fundraising requires a substantial commitment of time and energy. Such campaigns are also difficult to maintain over the years, and without an obvious targeted donor population. The course instructors themselves have become a major source of matching funds. Students enrolled in the course, along with their social networks, are another key source of voluntary and anonymous contributions. Students can tap into ongoing social service campaigns in their sororities and fraternities to raise money or gather other valuable in-kind resources such as sports equipment. However, student contributions are limited by the cost of the program and their limited incomes, and fall off for most of the year when a course is not active. With deep regret the first author recently needed to email a school principal as follows, after she noted that scholarship funds have been exhausted:

*Thanks for letting me know about your next fundraising campaign. At this point in the calendar year, I don't have a good source of fundraising on my end. I can raise more funds during the months preceding our next March visit -- that will be March 2010, and I would have a group of 20 students and professors as usual.*

Other scholars have similarly recounted their own challenging experiences attempting to maintain relationships outside conventional academic avenues given the difficulties caused by great distances, lack of technology, and conflicting demands on participants' precious time (Crabtree, 2008; Sapp and Crabtree, 2002). We hope this section of challenges is not interpreted as complaint, but rather as honest reflection on our encounters as we strive to be worthy partners and agents of change, however modest.

## **Conclusion, Implications, and Next Steps**

Civic engagement in Dominica has provided the first author with the most fulfilling experience of his academic career. In part, this is because it is a geography project *par excellence*— so many inter-connected teaching, research, and community activities. The Dominica project also provides rewards from the intellectual collaboration. It combines teaching, student thesis advising, new relevant research projects devised by students, and opportunities for scholarly research and co-authoring with students. Because of our many long-term connections with people throughout Dominica, students can choose to pursue research projects most in line

with their passions, while enjoying the benefits of easily connecting with many contacts at both the administrative and grassroots levels.

While the student projects take advantage of our longer-term experience with community collaborators, they also extend and deepen relationships with community members, local leaders and activists, so that the collective result is an ongoing blossoming of collaboration for sustainable living. This contrasts with many other student thesis projects in other countries in which the student is left alone to develop her/his own contacts. Civic engagement in Dominica has brought a more enriching and activist dimension to the first author's research and teaching. And it has made the empirical work more meaningful for all involved, including students and community collaborators. Another pedagogic goal of the Dominica workshop is to provide undergraduate students with study abroad experience stepping stone from which they can later more confidently and ambitiously craft their own projects in other international locales, perhaps as graduate students. The effort is to introduce students to another culture, but also to provide a living example of how to engage people of another culture in a respectful and mutually beneficial way.

Our civic engagement activities in Dominica have significant pedagogical value beyond the Eastern Caribbean. We believe our Dominica experience provides a valuable model for innovative university teaching. From student reactions, we believe that there is no substitute for this kind of direct community-level experience for learning about the Global South and other cultures, and about grassroots collaboration. This sort of broader pedagogical impact is already beginning to happen. The project has generated considerable interest among others wishing to emulate it. Thus far seven faculty and staff from Miami University or from other schools have participated in the Dominica course. They participate in the course for a number of reasons, but these include learning firsthand how our group manages to deeply engage our community counterparts across cultural lines, with so many miles between us, and over a short twelve days. From this experience participants have created several new courses, while they have also revised other courses to incorporate hands-on, community-based collaboration.

This paper has been written from the perspective of course conveners and participatory action researchers. We are obviously pleased about how our international civic engagement project has developed, but we've said relatively little about the opinions of and impacts on our student and host community partners. The viewpoints of these two groups are underresearched in the field of international civic engagement in general (Bringle et al., 2009; Bringle et al., forthcoming), and we hope to consolidate such evidence in the future. One significant impact we *have* noted in this paper is that the long-term relationship with Dominica and the annual course have facilitated and enhanced students' thesis projects, and that these projects have incorporated research priorities from our hosts. The topic requires more focus in the future.

What does this all mean to our Dominican partners? How do they perceive our partnerships, and to what extent do their perceptions parallel or contrast with ours presented in this essay? Positionality dictates that our partners see our relationships differently than we do (Kingsbury



and Klak, 2005). We've said relatively little about the perspectives of our Dominican counterparts, although we *have* noted that their benefits include financial inputs, manual labor, relevant research projects, and an outside interest in contributing positively to ameliorating their community challenges. Some recent writings offer useful guidelines about how better to document the impact of international civic engagement on the host communities, particularly from the perspectives of community members themselves (Kiely, forthcoming; Whitney and Clayton, forthcoming). Kahn (forthcoming) rightly emphasizes that international work like ours is about involving, not merely benefitting, a given community that must be understood as diverse and dynamic. Our partnerships with these communities are likewise constantly evolving, and a priority as we move forward is to more fully incorporate the perspectives of our partners into this work.

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